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ABSTRACT

The concept of self is basically derived from: (1) the responses made toward the individual by significant people in his immediate environment; (2) his perceptions of their behavior relevant to him; (3) the internalization of his perceptions into a coherent set of self-views; (4) the resultant self which he perceives as reflected back into the eyes of the significant others; (5) the reinforcement of that self as seen by him and by others and by his view of their concepts of him; and (6) his responses to the challenges and pressures of living. The self is reinforced by others who are like him, others who are important to him, others who are identification models of behavior, and himself when he chooses those behaviors that "prove" he is right about himself. An individual's self-esteem can suffer when he is not accepted, when he doubts his acceptability or competence, or when significant others disagree about his worth. The most common measures of self-concept are self-report, observational techniques, and combinational methods (projective techniques and determining the congruence between self-ratings and ratings of others. A number of limitations in self-concept assessment are listed. Educators can enhance and sometimes modify the self-concept of students by: giving them unconditional acceptance as a person of dignity and worth; recognizing their special abilities and strengths, which increases self-confidence; providing both challenge and boundary for the emerging self, and providing modeling agents of behavior. (KM)

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Symposium

Tests of Self Concept as Measures of Personality Change

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I. Definition

II. Theoretical Foundation

III. Measuring the Self Concept

IV. Implications for Education

Address presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, New Orleans, Louisiana, February, 1973.

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Tests of Self Concept as Measures of Personality Change

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I. Definition

There are many ways of looking at the self.

(1) Is it fact or artifact? Since it cannot be directly observed, we must assume or infer its presence from behavior. Therefore, it is a construct.

(2) Is it subject or object? I or me? Both, really, because the organism is perceiving the self, the perceived. The concept of self also determines not only what the organism sees, but how he sees it. It influences his choices while influenced by those choices.

(3) Is it structure or process? Again, both, since we must look at the parts that make up the whole as well as the dynamics of the self concept as the organism is experiencing. It can be described at any moment, though it is not exclusively static. Though it is not transient, it can be modified; yet it is resistant to change.

(4) Is it single or multiple? There is one aspect of the self which is foundational, which is at the base of the self's consistency, and which is determined by the way the individual sees himself as a person, a human being. Yet, there may also be varying feelings about the self which are derived from the roles of the individual--e.g., as student, son, football player.

(5) Is it resource or value? The self is both means and ends, since the organism's own abilities are involved in seeking some goal which will bring it success as against failure. Because the self is an instrument of assessment which the organism must depend upon in all situations, it becomes a "resource" of evaluation and, hence, a "valued" object of worth.

(6) Is it figure or ground? It alternates between the two, since it cannot be both at once. The self is figure when the organism is preserving or enhancing it. It becomes ground--a frame of reference--against which valuations are made.

If the self concept is all these things, then how can we define it operationally in order to measure it? The self concept has been used synonymously with self-appraisal, self-acceptance, self-image, self-esteem, self-structure, self-identification, self-regard. But, if we define the concept of self like any concept--"an abstract idea generalized from particular instances" --then the term, "self-perception", seems most workable. And, believing as we do, that the self is crucially determined by the interaction of the individual with other persons important to him, and especially by the way he views their feelings towards him, then the perceptions of self seem to be more feasible and, hence, more measurable. In other words, the self concept is the system of perceptions which the individual formulates of himself in awareness of his distinctive existence.

The self exists, though we cannot see it, as such, just as we cannot see a motive, a thought, or electricity. We infer its existence from the behavior that we do see on the self-report that the individual gives us. The individual has perceptions of himself that could be summed up as generally "negative" or "positive" but perhaps more realistically a combination thereof. The individual attaches value to those perceptions of the self, comprising both positive and negative valences. As a result of those perceptions, the organism estimates the

worth of the self as "higher", as opposed to "lower", rather than a baseline of "nothingness", as Erikson might say; otherwise the person subsuming the self might not survive. The individual also perceives the self as being "this" rather than "that", possessing more of one trait and less of another, and characterized by a special blend of qualities which make the individual distinctive and unusual while at the same time acceptable and significant.

How did the individual come to be the way he/she is? What is the etiology of the self? And, what are the shaping influences which forge a personality from the raw material found at birth?

II. Theoretical Foundation

The concept of self is basically derived: (1) from the responses made toward the individual by the people in his immediate environment who are important to him; (2) from his perceptions of their behavior relevant to himself as a person; (3) from the internalization of his perceptions into a coherent set of self-views; (4) from the resultant self which he perceives as reflected back into the eyes of those "significant others"; (5) from the reinforcement of that self as seen by the organism and by others, and by his view of their concepts of him; and (6) from his responses to the challenges and pressures which he encounters in the normal course of living.

The process of forging the self begins first with the behavior of significant others toward the individual which shapes the foundation of the emergent self. If these important people like him, he is likely to like himself. If his parents love him unconditionally, with no strings attached, he is more apt to respect himself and develop the capacity to love in return. If his friends accept him as an individual in his own right, to associate with, he more readily begins to accept himself as a person who is worth being with, and hence his positive

self unfolds in the process. If his teachers see him as an evolving, special individual with strengths and weaknesses like everyone else, if she emphasizes his capacities and helps them to grow, then he more readily forms a concept of himself as someone who can do something well. He subsequently develops confidence in his ability to thrive, a feeling of competence in mastering his environment, and a sense of power over what happens to him. The accrued satisfaction molds a sense of well-being which is reflected in the self, whether as reported or observed.

Weaving in and out of all these dimensions is the organism's perception of others' perceptions of him. In every case, it is not merely how others respond to him, but how he sees their responses to him, how he feels about those responses, and how he thinks the others view him as a person. If his parents, for example, view him quite favorably, but he sees their reactions to him as generally negative, then he can be expected to perceive himself as less positive than if his own view of their attitudes--his "reflected self"-- were congruent with his parents' actual perceptions. In our own research, we have discovered the intricate web of interpersonal perceptions--self concepts, others' perceptions, reflected self--as vital to the shaping and the support of the self.

Furthermore, this concept of self is maintained by an intermittent schedule of reinforcement which then makes that self highly resistant to extinction. He is reinforced by: (1) others who are like him; (2) others who are important to him emotionally and cognitively; (3) others who are identification models of behavior; and (4) himself when he selectively, though perhaps unwittingly, chooses those behaviors which "prove" he is right about himself and others' perceptions of him. Therefore, because the individual

judges himself within the social context that others judge him and respond to him, the larger social environment--another social class, perhaps, or another ethnic group--does not pose a threat of change to his self, especially if the valuations made by people in that other world are inconsistent with what he has come to believe about himself. Only when he defines the self against the larger world or attaches meaning to his concept of self within a more heterogeneous society might he regard their perceptions of him as decisive or conclusive.

Hence, the self-esteem of an individual can suffer generally in four ways: (1) if the individual finds himself unacceptable to significant people in his immediate environment; (2) if he does not even receive acceptance in the larger world--especially crucial if he has not achieved acceptance at the first level of "significant others"; (3) when expectations of his behavior change and he begins to have doubts about his acceptability or his competence to handle the problems of living; and (4) when the different segments of significant others--especially, peers and parents--are at variance with one another as to the worth of the individual. Hence, poverty in and of itself does not "determine" lower self concepts. Conversely, wealth is not a guarantee of high self-perceptions. The same analogy can be drawn with lower and upper SES levels. In other words, one's self concept is more acutely molded by the individual's perception of himself in relation to how he perceives that significant others perceive him, how they respond to him, and how he infers their valuations of him from their behavior towards him.

However, the individual cannot remain in an insulated environment. The fetus must leave the comfortable womb. The baby must leave the stable incubator. The child must leave the neighborhood school. The young adult

must leave the protecting shell of the parents' home. New demands are thrust upon the neophyte, and he must begin to make his own decisions or to do more for himself as he drives toward greater independence. At these times, the self may suffer a setback, a loss in esteem and confidence--partly because he does not know how he should respond, partly because he is afraid he won't "measure up" to his own aspirations and in the eyes of those he admires, and partly because he is not sure he can handle the new demands which have been thrusted upon him without falling on his face. These may well be some of the reasons why the self concept decreases in adolescence, diminishes when the individual reaches new thresholds or is forced into new experiences, and lowers when he cannot cope with adversity.

How do we know when the self concept is positive, when the reflected self is low, when self-perceptions have changed? We can investigate these questions in a variety of ways, none of which is entirely flawless, but which give us some idea of the level and direction of self since we cannot directly observe it.

III. Measuring the Self Concept

The self has been measured in as many ways, possibly, as there are of defining it. But perhaps the most common measures are of the following types:

(1) self-report: The self is inferred from the individual's own responses, which can be given on a variety of forms. In general, the attendant problems with this type are fakeability, social desirability, response styles, and acquiescence.

(a) rating scales--most common though they are particularly vulnerable in terms of error of central tendency, response set, and acquiescence. Other problems are in the differential meanings and ambiguity of trait names or scale units to the respondents.

(b) adjective check lists--Children relate more effectively to complete thoughts rather than isolated words (like nouns or adjectives) for describing themselves, as we discovered in the pilot project launched for measuring the self-perceptions of advantaged and disadvantaged children.

(c) open-ended questionnaires--difficult to score and analyze.

(d) Q-sort methodology--Although the respondent typically sorts out statements which he perceives as ranging from least characteristic to most characteristic of himself in a quasi-normal distribution of piles, there is no strength of response in describing the self.

(e) pictorial forms--ambiguous, contrived, and lacking standardization of administration and scoring.

(f) statements to which the person agrees or disagrees--lacking in strength of response.

(g) semantic differential--usually seven categories along a continuum which separates a pair of dichotomous traits, though such a form necessitates the respondent's making finer distinctions about himself which he may be unable to do. Fewer anchor points are more likely to add only chance variance to the individual's judgments about himself. Another problem is the middle ground which he can use if he does not care to respond on a particular item. The advantage of this form is that it provides both direction and intensity of response on a continuum between two terms which are opposite in meaning. Our own instrument (SPI) is a measure originally developed to incorporate these advantages while controlling for irrelevant response determiners with a forced-choice format (no middle ground), fewer points along the continuum for rating the self, a short enough test so that children would not get tired taking it and thereby decrease its validity, language understood by elementary school children and those of disadvantaged backgrounds, simplicity of administration so that experienced testers would not be required, and sufficient generalizability so that a variety of "selves" could be measured using the same pairs of sentences on different forms.

(2) observational techniques: The self is inferred from the individual's behavior. The variety for this type ranges from the structural interview to the categorizing of behaviors by a clinically trained observer or the measuring of the perceptions of a third person, notably one or more of the "significant others."

(3) combinational methods: The self is inferred from the interaction of two or more types.

(a) projective techniques--in which the individual's self-related responses are interpreted by clinicians. Projective techniques have some distinct strengths in terms of a less threatening atmosphere for the respondent, greater reduction of embarrassment and defensiveness, and the smaller likelihood of fakeability. The attendant problems are the lack of objectivity in scoring, limited applicability, restricted interpretation of scores, requirement of highly trained personnel in both scoring and administration, deficiency of norms for comparisons, weak reliability, and difficulty in assessing validity.

(b) determining the congruence between self-ratings and ratings of others, whether clinically trained observers or third parties. This area of research has been particularly fruitful for us in confirming the impact of significant others on the self concept. When comparing the self with one of the "social selves"--the self as reflected in someone else--or the view that the individual himself thinks that others have toward him, we have found high convergence between how he looks at himself, how he thinks his parents look at him, and how his parents actually rate him. Furthermore, two forms of his reflected self--how he thinks his parents and his teachers see him--were very similar, even though there was high congruence between his self-ratings and his parents' ratings of him but the teachers' ratings of him were quite different. His perceptions of his parents' attitudes towards him can color his perceptions of how others besides his parents view him as a person. This result also seems to indicate the primacy of parents as significant others over others in the child's world.

As with any personality measure, there are problems in self-concept assessment. Here are some of the limitations.

(1) The respondent may not be clear about the items.

(2) He may have difficulty with the language used.

(3) He may not have command of the verbal symbols used in expressing ideas and concepts.

(4) He may be defensive about himself.

(5) He may wish to give socially acceptable answers rather than reveal his true self.

(6) He may feel threatened by the "testing" atmosphere.

(7) He may feel that the experimenter is "snooping".

(8) He may lack motivation.

(9) The external conditions may be inappropriate for the testing situation.

(10) The observer may lack objectivity or have personal biases which could invalidate the inferences he draws from the subject's behavior.

(11) The interviewer may possessbias or show susceptibility to halo effect.

(12) The scorer may show bias or draw conclusions far beyond the data.

(13) Some items may be highly familiar while others may not.

(14) The items may be prone to fakeability or acquiescence.

(15) The form of the items may not be operational for some individuals.

(16) Items may be vague and too open to interpretation.

All these may be implicit in the measurement process of the self concept. Yet, what is the alternative? Either we recognize the attendant problems, continually strive to improve our techniques, and go on accumulating data in order to expand our knowledge of the self, or we throw up our hands and say, "What's the use?".

On the other hand, we do not attempt the job of measuring the self concept specifically, or personality in general, capriciously. Forms are devised for the intended grades, ages, and groups, with appropriate language and vocabulary, within the ever-present constraints of time and money, and with the ultimate question raised: "Will the results be available and used wisely?". The search goes on for more systematic and real trait categories, for more efficient formats for measuring those traits, and for less restricted application of more valid results.

Perhaps we haven't improved on William James's definition of the self, which he made almost a century ago; but we have certainly acquired much information about its manifestations. James, in his Principles of Psychology (1890), wrote:

> "In its widest possible sense, a man's self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank account."

The final question, then, is: "What is the relationship between the self concept and the educational process?" How can we apply the knowledge accumulated to what goes on in the teaching-learning system?

IV. Implications for Education

Self-perceptions cannot evolve in a vacuum. The self needs a comparative base, an external frame of reference, which comes primarily from the people surrounding the person, his interactions with them, how he perceives their views of him, and his experiences. In early childhood, the parents and other family members are primary forces for self-definition. In the school years, teachers and peers also become important, with peers particularly diluting

some of the parental power but not replacing it entirely. Yet, even though we are dealing with highly ingrained self-perceptions by the time children enter into a formal classroom and with other conflicting or facilitating influences, there are ways that educators can enhance, and in some cases modify, the self concept.

(1) A child requires unconditional acceptance as a person of dignity and worth. Maybe the behaviors and actions need repair, but the doer is "O.K." as a human being--or, in the jargon of the day, "a beautiful person". Along with this comes self-acceptance of what he is rather than what he is not.

(2) A child needs self-confidence, which comes from recognition of his special abilities and strengths. This does not mean that he should be given daily reminders of his limitations and failures. If he is to grow in competence and self-assurance, then he needs to test his capacity to function as a viable entity and to receive reinforcement of his correct responses rather than punishment of his incorrect responses.

(3) The emerging self requires both challenge and boundary. He needs reasonable and realistic limits on what he does and what he is allowed to do. Otherwise, how can the child know he has achieved, that what he has done is of a calibre he is capable of attaining, or where he has improved? Where is the frame of reference that tells a child clearly and unequivocally that he has reached his goal?

(4) The child also needs modeling agents of behavior. If teachers are to serve this function, then they must share an atmosphere of mutual acceptance with the students. They must also exhibit symptoms of positive self concepts themselves.

These recommendations will not insure a healthy self concept, since the teacher is generally lower on the hierarchy of "significant others" than parents and peers, but they may help in two ways:

(1) If the self is positive when the organism enters the world of schooling, then such treatment can reinforce that self, helping it to become even stronger for handling the pressures and decisions which lie ahead.

(2) If the self is weak or negative, then perhaps the teacher can become a catalyst for constructive change and modification. Otherwise, the only alternative remaining is further decline. The teacher may well play an important role in modifying the self concept for a so-called "unacceptable" and self-warring child. If the teacher makes greater demands on the child than he is able to meet and his expectations are too high, then the child is likely to begin to have doubts about his own competence and worth. His self concept may possibly reflect the lessening of his Self.

When the child feels so unacceptable to others that he becomes unacceptable to himself, then the self is indeed a worthless commodity. Yet, this "worthless" being is all that he has left. "In its widest possible sense, a man's self is the sum total of all that he can call his" (James, 1890). What will the child call his? What will be his concept of self?